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Review of “The Literary Wittgenstein”

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Book Review

The Literary Wittgenstein, John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (eds.), Routledge: London, 2004, 368pp (index, ix in Preface), \$33.95 (pbk), ISBN 0415289734.

This book is a collection of twenty essays by eighteen authors (Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond offer two essays each), all but three of which are previously unpublished. The general aim of the book is to apply a Wittgensteinian methodology to literary theory and the philosophy of literature, tackling questions related to deconstruction, the nature of poetic language, the relevance of literature to philosophy, the logic and semantics of fictional discourse, and more besides. Literary figures discussed in the book include Joseph Conrad, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Arthur Conan Doyle, William Faulkner, Friedrich Holderlin, and William Shakespeare.

The contributions are all written by academics (mainly philosophers) known for their work on either Wittgenstein (e.g. Joachim Schulte, Cora, Diamond, Dale Jacquette, and Rupert Read), aesthetics (e.g. Richard Eldridge, John Gibson, Bernard Harrison, and David Schalkwyk), or both (e.g. Stanley Cavell, James Guetti, Garry L. Hagberg, and Marjorie Perloff). The dominating reading—or rather set of readings—of Wittgenstein influencing most (though by no means all) of the pieces collected here is what has come to be known as ‘The New Wittgenstein’, best distinguished from older readings by (a) its insistence that the methodological and philosophical gap between the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations* is much narrower than was previously believed (b) its willingness to ascribe to both the early and the later Wittgenstein the view that philosophy differs (or at any rate ought to differ) from poetry in degree rather than kind, as well as the related conviction that *how* he said something was at least as important as *what* he said, and (c) its adherence to the view that the subject matter of philosophy is not a series of topics or even problems but rather the totality of philosophical texts, where the criteria for what counts as the latter are typically defined in terms of (b) above. This is not the place to mount a critique of this new wave of Wittgensteinian interpretation, so let me instead content myself by merely warning the reader that she should not let the spirit of this volume mislead her into thinking that the general approach to philosophy adopted therein is a necessary characteristic of Wittgensteinian methodology, let alone one espoused by Wittgenstein himself, a point partly brought home by Joseph Margolis in the concluding essay of the volume (see below).

The book begins with a helpful introductory essay by Wolfgang Huemer before dividing into five parts of descending length: Part *I* is comprised of seven pieces, *II* of five, *III* of four, *IV* of two, and *V* of just one. In this review I shall attempt to briefly summarise the main ideas introduced in each section, with criticism focusing on common themes and ideas, with occasional reference to a

representative number of essays.

The essays which make up Part *I* ('Philosophy as a kind of literature/Literature as a kind of philosophy') share the common aim of challenging the widespread view that what distinguishes philosophical texts from literary ones is that the former (but not the latter) aim to describe truths about the world, in much the same way as science does, whilst the latter (but not the former) is concerned with conveying beauty and emotion, rather than fact. I have much sympathy for this view. For one, as Wittgenstein often stressed, philosophy is not an activity which helps us to attain new *facts* (be they empirical or metaphysical). Rather—if we are lucky—it enlightens by leading to new ways of understanding, in particular understanding of how philosophical confusions arise. Literature too is concerned with understanding, however it is *rarely* concerned with understanding how it is that philosophical problems arise. Thus it is, I think, misleading to talk of 'philosophy as a kind of literature' and of 'literature as a kind of philosophy'. Whatever one may think of Wittgenstein's literary aspirations, most philosophy—including most *good* philosophy—is not (and does not aspire to be) a kind of literature. Likewise, although there is much philosophising to be found in literature, it is no more than can be found in many fields of science, politics, history, law, and psychology (think, for example, of the confused ramblings which make up the concluding chapter of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*).

The articles in Part *II* ('Reading with Wittgenstein') aim to show how it is that Wittgenstein's philosophy of language can help us to read literary texts. Thus for example, Sonia Sedivy and Martin Stone both convincingly appeal to Wittgenstein in a successful attempt to show why the post-modern view that the meaning of a literary text is generated by the reader is fundamentally confused. In a similar spirit, Joachim Schulte appeals to Wittgenstein's contrast between live and dead signs in the hope of providing an account of how it is that we can grasp the content of a poem. Schulte writes clearly and for the most part persuasively, though the reader must be warned that the term 'content' is being used here in an extremely loose sense. Cora Diamond's contributions on the notion of morals that are 'not in a text' are far harder to follow, and to the extent that I could make sense of them, seemed to be suggesting that Wittgenstein rightly held the view that the ethical is something *unutterable* that can only be conveyed through its absence from a text (pp. 129-31). But there is a tension between this view and Diamond's own notorious 'resolute' interpretation of the *Tractatus*, according to which we must not ascribe to Wittgenstein the blatantly incoherent view that what cannot be said can nonetheless be thought or grasped in some way. Diamond believes (and, more importantly, believes that the early Wittgenstein believed) that what cannot be said cannot be *shown* either, but the nonsensical propositions we use in an attempt to say what cannot be said (or shown) nonetheless *elucidate* something (namely the fact that language often misleads us into thinking that we have said something when in actual fact we have failed). But now we must ask whether the *ethical* that is said to be contained in the work through its being absent (whatever that means) is meant to be something that can be *shown* or if it is merely the case that its absence elucidates. If the former, then the 'resolute' reading cannot be right. If the latter, I cannot see how what is meant to be elucidated could possibly be conceived of as being ethical. Indeed, it does not even make sense to talk of something unutterable as *being* ethical. At best the absence of ethical statements would elucidate that ethics is not possible, and yet it is clear that Wittgenstein thought it was *important*; this brings us back to the tension with the 'resolute' reading for it can only allow that nonsense is important in the sense that it can elucidate something non-ethical.

Part *III*, 'Literature and the boundaries of self and sense', addresses questions relating to personal identity, and the nature of the self. The contributions in this section highlight some interesting parallels between Wittgenstein's method and style and that of various novelists (such as Conrad and Faulkner), but, with the exception of Rupert Read's essay on whether we can understand people suffering from severe mental illness, rarely go beyond this.

Part *IV*, 'Fiction and the *Tractatus*', contains just what it says on the tin: two essays on the *Tractatus* and the notion of fictionality. The first essay, by Alex Burri examines what a Tractarian theory of literature might look like while the second, by Dale Jacquette, focuses more specifically on what a Tractarian logic of fiction would look like, and whether it could succeed. Both essays ask revealing questions about the *Tractatus* and will no doubt be useful to any reader interested in the early Wittgenstein's theory of meaning.

The fifth and final section of the book, 'The Larger View', is solely comprised of Joseph Margolis' pessimistically-titled essay on 'unlikely prospects for applying Wittgenstein's "method" to aesthetics and the philosophy of art' in which Margolis questions whether it is at all possible to find such a thing as a 'general method' in Wittgenstein's thought. It is a useful (not to mention brave) move to end the book on such a critical note, for if Margolis is right (and some of what he says is certainly persuasive) then the very project which motivates this collection is threatened. Either way, this book will undoubtedly become required reading for Wittgensteinians working in aesthetics.

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